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## The 2014 presidential election in Turkey



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The election of the 12th President of Turkey was remarkably different than the elections of the previous 11. For the first time in the history of the Republic, the head of the state was directly elected by ordinary people rather than chosen by their representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*). On 10 August 2014, the incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a simple majority of votes in the first round of the election and became the president for the next five years.

### 1. Background

The election took place at the end of the seven-year term of the outgoing President Abdullah Gül, a co-

founder of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) led by Erdoğan. Erdoğan's AKP had won yet another victory earlier in the same year with the 2014 Turkish local elections, which were held on 30 March. For many voters and parties alike, this was a clear forecast for the presidential election to follow in five months' time. Nevertheless, the background to the 2014 presidential election goes far beyond those five months; as far as the previous presidential elections held in 2007.

The 2007 presidential elections proved to be a highly problematic process that 'triggered a deep systematic crisis' in Turkish politics (Bacik, 2008, p.377). With its more than enough seats in the assembly, the AKP should have had no arithmetic problem electing its own candidate, then the Foreign Minister Gül. However, there was a very tense political atmosphere outside the assembly as secular groups and elites protested against the idea of having an

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Islamist president. A controversial decision from the Constitutional Court declaring the first round of voting in the assembly invalid and a statement from the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces intervening in the elections brought the election process to a deadlock.

Although the assembly eventually elected Gül as the president, that same year the AKP introduced a constitutional referendum on electoral reform to avoid future reoccurrences. The approval of the reform meant that future presidents were to be elected by popular vote. Moreover, the reform included two further related amendments to the constitution: the presidential term is reduced from seven to five years while presidents are allowed to seek re-election for a second term in office. However, it was not immediately clear whether these new amendments applied to Gül's presidency, who was elected for a single term of seven years, or to other previous presidents who were still alive. Indeed, many aspects of the upcoming presidential election stayed unclear until the enactment of the Law on Presidential Elections in 2012. An important aspect of this legislation was the declaration that Gül's term would last not five but seven years, which was in effect the declaration of the year of the upcoming presidential election as 2014. It also stated that the single-term limit of the pre-reform era still applies to the previous presidents and therefore that they cannot be nominated for what would be their second term. This part of the legislation was annulled by the Constitutional Court, making it possible for the previous presidents, and most importantly for outgoing President Gül, to be nominated for the 2014 presidential election.

The Supreme Election Council (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*) decided to hold the first round of the election on 10 August 2014. If no candidate was elected on that first ballot, a second round would be held on 24 August 2014. The political atmosphere in the summer of 2014 surrounding the presidential election was nothing like in 2007 — there was no visible intention to prevent the election process from taking its course. The AKP had been in power since 2002, winning every single popular vote in the meantime, be it the local and national elections or the referenda. They had the power and the time to change the bureaucracy for their liking. Having a president, who appoints high-level bureaucrats, from their own party for the last seven years had definitely helped in this sense. Besides, a considerable number of ex-bureaucrats were now in jail for allegedly attempting different coups against the AKP governments. Therefore the state elites, who played an important role in the 2007 presidential elections, were not the same actors in 2014.

## 2. Electoral system

The presidential election system is a two-round voting system. A candidate needs an absolute majority of votes to win the election. If no candidate achieves this in the first round, then all but the two candidates receiving the most votes are eliminated before a second round takes place on the second Sunday after the first vote. The second round of voting guarantees that one of the candidates wins the

**Table 1**

Donations and public broadcasting received by each candidate.

Candidate	Donations <sup>a</sup>	Public broadcasting <sup>b</sup>
Erdoğan	55,260,778 Liras (\$25,489,288)	559 min
İhsanoğlu	8,500,000 Liras (\$3,920,664)	137 min
Demirtaş	1,213,000 Liras (\$559,501)	18 min

<sup>a</sup> Denotes the total amount of self-reported donations on 9 August 2014. Source: [Hürriyet Daily News \(2014a\)](#). The figures in brackets are the approximate values in U.S. dollar on that day as calculated by the author.

<sup>b</sup> Denotes the total number of minutes devoted to the coverage of each candidate by the public broadcaster's news channel TRT Haber between 29 June and 10 July 2014. Source: [Hürriyet Daily News \(2014b\)](#).

majority of the votes as there are only two candidates running.

Despite losing the right to elect the president, the members (MPs) in the Grand National Assembly continue to have a central role in the election process. The Law on Presidential Elections subjects the nominations to the backing of MPs where each party can propose only one candidate.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, standing as a candidate requires signatures by at least 20 MPs from the 550-seat assembly. In theory, this limits the maximum number of candidates to 27. However, the actual number of candidates is likely to be much lower in practice and indeed lower than in many other presidential elections in parliamentary systems around the world. On the one hand, smaller parties with less than 20 seats cannot nominate their own candidate. On the other hand, in an assembly with a relatively high party discipline, MPs from larger parties are likely to back the candidate that their leadership proposes.

All Turkish citizens over the age of 18 residing abroad as well as in Turkey are eligible to vote. There are over 2.5 million registered voters outside Turkey (see [Table 2](#)), who have long had the right to vote in Turkish elections provided that they go to the polls set up at the customs offices. However, this is a right used by only those who happen to visit Turkey during the election period at the customs, which starts approximately a month ahead of the election day, resulting in a very low turnout. Allowing the citizens abroad to cast their votes in Turkish embassies and consulates had been on the political agenda since 2007, but a series of constitutional and administrative challenges delayed its application ([Kesgin, 2012](#)). The 2014 presidential election happened to be the first occasion where the overseas voting system was in place. Voting took place in 103 consulates in 54 countries with a prior appointment.

## 3. Candidates

Beside the AKP who had been governing the country since 2002, there were three other parliamentary party groups in opposition in the Grand National Assembly in 2014: Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*,

<sup>1</sup> Parties can propose a joint candidate if their total share of votes in the previous general elections is above 10 per cent — the threshold to secure any parliamentary representation.

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